

FRENCH PHILOSOPHY IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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CHAPTER I

Fin-de-siècle: the professors of the Republic

Abandoning the study of John Stuart Mill only for that of Lachelier, the less she believed in the reality of the external world, the more desperately she sought to establish herself in a good position in it before she died.

(Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, IV, 438)

PHILOSOPHY AND THE NEW UNIVERSITY

Writing just after the end of World War I, an acute observer of the French philosophical scene judged that “philosophical research had never been more abundant, more serious, and more intense among us than in the last thirty years”.¹ This flowering was due to the place of philosophy in the new educational system set up by the Third Republic in the wake of the demoralizing defeat in the Franco-Prussian War. The French had been humiliated by the capture of Napoleon III at Sedan, devastated by the long siege of Paris, and terrified by what most of the bourgeoisie saw as seventy-three days of anarchy under the radical socialism of the Commune. Much of the new Republic’s effort at spiritual restoration was driven by a rejection of the traditional values of institutional religion, which it aimed to replace with an enlightened secular worldview. A principal vehicle of this enterprise was educational reform and specifically the building of a university system dedicated to the ideals of science, reason, and humanism. Albert Thibaudet highlighted the importance of this reform when he labeled the Third Republic “the republic of professors”.²

Philosophy was at the center of the new educational regime, exerting its influence through the famous “classe de philosophie”

¹ Dominique Parodi, *La philosophie contemporaine en France*, 9–10.

² In his *La république des professeurs*.

that was the main requirement for students in French public high schools (lycées) during their last year (when they were seventeen to eighteen years old).³ The class's modern history went back to regulations of 1809 that reestablished the medieval divisions of philosophy into logic, metaphysics, and morality and stipulated that it be studied for eight hours a week. There was also introduced a division treating the history of philosophy. Around 1830, Victor Cousin⁴ added psychology, which soon became the most important element of the curriculum. Also, where the rules of 1809 had given merely a set of recommendations for teaching and a list of authors, Cousin worked out a detailed required structure. The idea was to cover the whole of philosophy, both its problems and its history, in a year-long grand synthesis. Cousin also began the process of laicizing philosophy, by reducing the role of religious questions. His structure stayed in place until philosophy was eliminated from the curriculum of the lycées in 1853 under the Second Empire.

In 1863 philosophy was restored to the lycées and became a required subject for all students in the last year of secondary education.⁵ During the First Empire, a lycée education became required for many civil service positions. This meant that, after 1863, the “classe de philosophie” was extremely important for French secondary students, since it was now a key topic on the exam they had to pass to receive their degree (the *baccalauréat*) and be eligible for state employment. Its importance was further emphasized by the reform of 1874, which made philosophy and rhetoric separate divisions, emphasizing philosophy's autonomy and distinctiveness. Moreover, since philosophy was taught only in a single year – the final one – it was presented as the culmination and synthesis of all that had gone before, the “crown”, as it was inevitably put, of secondary education. It was not surprising that philosophy soon replaced rhetoric as the course with the highest intellectual status

³ For an overview of the structure of the French educational system, see the Appendix.

⁴ Victor Cousin (1792–1867) was minister of education in the 1830s and 1840s under the bourgeois monarchy of Louis-Philippe. His own philosophical position, which he called eclecticism, tried to synthesize French philosophical psychology (deriving from Maine de Biran) with empiricism, Scottish realism, and German idealism. During the mid-nineteenth century, eclecticism had the status of an “official” philosophy in the French university. Cousin was also important as an editor, translator, and historian of philosophy.

⁵ For a general discussion of French education in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, see Fritz Ringer, *Fields of Knowledge: French Academic Culture in Comparative Perspective, 1890–1920*. On the role of philosophy in France during this period, see Jean-Louis Fabiani, *Les philosophes de la république*.

and, accordingly, attracted a large number of the brightest students interested in secondary teaching.

Since the main goal of the university teaching of philosophy was to produce teachers for the lycée philosophy class, there was considerable continuity between the content of the two programs. At the same time, the qualifying examination (the *agrégation*) for those who wanted to teach philosophy in the lycées was geared to university-level research rather than merely what we would think of as high-school teaching. The result was a large number of talented lycée teachers with a high level of specialist knowledge in philosophy; and, of course, the best of these went on to take doctorates in philosophy and become university professors.

The French educational system thus gave philosophy a highly privileged place in the Third Republic. There was an audience composed of a general public educated in the rudiments of philosophy, as well as a substantial number of secondary school teachers with specialist knowledge of the subject; and there was a highly elite group of university professors engaged in philosophical research. Accordingly, a faculty of philosophy presided over the “republic of professors”. Thibaudet falls into religious language in trying to express the sublimity of the philosopher’s role: “The philosophical vocation embodies a principle analogous to a priestly vocation. Anyone who has prepared for the *agrégation* in philosophy . . . has been touched, at some point, like a seminarian, by the idea that the highest degree of human grandeur is a life consecrated to the service of the mind and that the University lets one compete for positions that make it possible to render this service.”⁶

Nevertheless, as Ernst Curtius (writing in 1930) emphasized, French culture remained essentially literary. The dominant figures were writers such as Zola and Anatole France, who were outside the university system; and philosophical writing itself was literary in the sense that, as Bergson said, there was “no philosophical idea, no matter how profound or subtle, that could not be expressed in the language of everyday life [*la langue de tout le monde*]”.⁷ Curtius, imbued with German idealism’s conception of philosophy, saw the

⁶ *La république des professeurs*, 139.

⁷ Cited by Ernst Curtius, *The Civilization of France: An Introduction*, 100. Fabiani notes, however, that “during the period 1880–1914 there were no close connections between professors of philosophy and avant-garde writers” (*Les philosophes de la république*, 115). As we shall see, that changes with the generation of the 1930s.

French as surrendering the philosophical enterprise “to literary form and average intelligence” and thought this was why, although “in Germany intellectual culture may be philosophical, in France it can be literary only”.⁸

The university philosophy of the early Third Republic (before World War I) had both the strengths and the weaknesses of its privileged status. The high level of talent and the informed critical audience sustained a professional solidity that contemporaries favorably (and rightly) contrasted to the eloquent vagaries of Victor Cousin’s eclecticism and Hyppolite Taine’s positivism, which had dominated the Second Empire. Also, universal philosophical education and the high social position and connections of professors gave philosophy a strong influence on the general French culture. Scientists such as Henri Poincaré (brother-in-law of the philosopher Émile Boutroux) showed a particular interest in philosophical issues. Marcel Proust (a groomsman at Bergson’s wedding), was a friend of Léon Brunschvicg, his fellow lycée-student in the philosophy course of Alphonse Darlu. The strong philosophical content of the writings of André Gide and Paul Valéry is often remarked; and the work of André Malraux, who studied philosophy with Alain (the pseudonym of Émile Chartier), the most famous of all lycée teachers, has been characterized as “the thought of Alain transposed into the novel”.⁹

But privilege also encouraged intellectual complacency and damped the creativity that can rise from radical questioning by less socially secure thinkers. With the arguable exception of Bergson, the philosophers of the early Third Republic worked within a relatively narrow band defined by their training in the history of thought, their bourgeois moral ideals, and the political realities of their time. Curtius stretches the point to the maximum:

[French philosophy’s] conservative Humanism could not endure either the Pantheism of a world-intoxicated ecstasy, nor the transcendental idealism of the creative spirit, nor the knowledge of salvation which desires redemption and depreciates the value of the world, nor the moral criticism of an heroic will to power. A Hegel, a Schopenhauer, a Nietzsche are unthinkable in France.¹⁰

On the other hand, eschewing the ecstasies of Germanic metaphysics – and the attendant drive for strong originality – allowed the

⁸ *The Civilization of France: An Introduction*, 99–100.

⁹ Jean Guittou, *Regards sur la pensée française, 1870–1940*, 59.

¹⁰ *The Civilization of France: An Introduction*, 104.

French professors to create a fruitful circle of sensible conversation, focusing on a small set of key topics and grounded in a common formation and strong mutual respect. Such conversation was carried out in the *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* (founded by Xavier Léon and Léon Brunschvicg in 1893) and in meetings of the closely related Société Française de Philosophie (founded in 1901). The degree of shared understanding that could be assumed is most striking in André Lalande's project of a *Vocabulaire technique et critique de la philosophie*. This volume, which went through eleven editions between 1900 and 1926, offered detailed definitions of the full range of philosophical terms, finally formulated by Lalande but informed by commentary from most of the leading philosophers of the period. (Lalande's proposed definitions were discussed regularly at sessions of the Société, and the comments of members are printed beneath the *Vocabulaire's* entries.) The work came remarkably close to its goal of "achieving accord among philosophers – as much as possible – on what they understand by . . . philosophical terms".¹¹

Focused and fruitful, if not drastically creative, early Third Republic philosophy was rather like much contemporary analytic philosophy (or medieval scholasticism), though far less technical and rigorous and far more accessible to the general culture. Such thought is not likely to make new epochs, but it is an effective contribution to the civility and rationality of the age in which it finds itself.

Politically, the philosophers of the Third Republic, like other members of the new university, occupied an interesting and important position.¹² Their social status and position as government employees obviously made them part of the establishment, but since they had typically been born into intellectual families (with parents who were teachers, writers, physicians, etc.) they were less inclined to identify with the conservative values of the wealthy bourgeois class. (They had, in Pierre Bourdieu's terms, much more cultural capital than economic capital.) Accordingly, professors as a whole formed an influential class of liberal supporters of the Third Republic's ideals, with those with the highest level of intellectual status generally the most liberal. So, for example, in the Dreyfus affair, which split France

¹¹ *Vocabulaire technique et critique de la philosophie*, ix.

¹² See Fritz Ringer, *Fields of Knowledge: French Academic Culture in Comparative Perspective, 1890–1920*, 219–25.

at the turn of the century, the majority of professors at the Sorbonne and the École Normale Supérieure supported Dreyfus, and this support was particularly strong among philosophers.

Reflecting the Third Republic's secular liberalism, the central concerns of its philosophers were science, human freedom, and the relation between the two. Unlike the German idealists, who felt themselves possessed of intuitive or dialectical modes of knowing that far outstripped the plodding efforts of empirical science, these philosophers saw their reflections as grounded in an accurate understanding and appreciation of scientific results. On the other hand, even those closest to a positivist acceptance of the ultimate cognitive authority of science rejected empiricist epistemologies of scientific experience in favor of a rationalist active role for the mind. In a parallel way, construals of freedom typically avoided the determinism or compatibilism favored by empiricism and the subordination of the individual human will to an idealist absolute spirit. Because of this lack of sympathy with the dominant traditions of both Germany and Britain, French thought was very nearly autonomous during this period.¹³

POSITIVISM

Surveys of philosophy in France from 1870 to 1920 almost always employ a standard division of their subject into three schools: positivism, spiritualism, and idealism. These are useful categories for understanding the problems and approaches of the period, but they are much less helpful as classifications of individual thinkers. This is particularly so for positivism. The term was first used by Auguste Comte (1798–1857) to characterize his effort to develop a philosophy based on only the plain (positive) facts of experience – of which science provides paradigm examples – and to avoid metaphysical hypotheses. It came to be applied to any view that privileged empirical science over metaphysical thought. A “positivist” might well hold strongly scientific views such as Humean empiricism or materialistic reductionism, but not necessarily. Many positivists

¹³ Similarly, there was little foreign interest in French philosophy. Harald Höffding, for example, in his comprehensive history of modern philosophy, omits any treatment of French philosophers of the latter half of the nineteenth century, noting that, although they are important in the thought of their own country, “they have brought no new principles to bear on the discussion of problems” (*A History of Modern Philosophy*, 486).

rejected Comte's exclusion of theoretical entities, such as atoms, from science, and Comte himself maintained the irreducibility of biology and sociology to physics and chemistry. Later, leading positivists such as Ernest Renan and Hyppolite Taine painted grand visions of historical progress that were with some plausibility labeled Hegelian. This represented a broadening and dilution of positivism as it became more a general intellectual orientation than a well-defined philosophical position. In the mid-nineteenth century, positivism was still a major force, but its main proponents were literary figures such as Renan and Taine rather than academic philosophers. From 1870 on it was rejected by every major philosopher.¹⁴

Nonetheless, the positivist spirit survived. It was a major motivation for extending the methods of the natural sciences to the human domain, leading to the seminal work of Durkheim in sociology and of Pierre Janet in empirical psychology.¹⁵ Such work did not assume or imply that all knowledge was scientific, but it did constitute a challenge to anti-positivist arguments that the specifically human domain was not open to empirical understanding. Other vital legacies of positivism were the development, by Poincaré and Duhem, of philosophy of science as a separate subdiscipline and the central role accorded detailed discussions of the history and results of science by virtually every major figure from Boutroux to Brunschvicg and Bergson. Indeed, by the 1930s Bachelard could respectably maintain that philosophy, while not reducible to science, should be identified with the philosophy of science.

SPIRITUALISM: RAVAISSON AND RENOUVIER

Spiritualism has a good claim to be the national philosophy of France. It is rooted in Descartes' assertion of the epistemic and

¹⁴ One thinker who did defend a strong positivist position in the early 1900s was Félix Le Dantec (1869–1917). Parodi briefly summarizes his views in his survey of the contemporary scene; but then, in place of his usual critical assessment, he merely remarks, “it would be pointless to criticize such work” (*La philosophie contemporaine en France*, 57). The marginal place of positivism is also suggested by the two pages devoted to it in Lalande's *Vocabulaire*, in contrast to the four pages on spiritualism and the nine on idealism.

¹⁵ For a long time, there was no sharp distinction drawn between psychology/sociology and philosophy. Even well into the twentieth century, Durkheim, Janet, and similar thinkers were routinely regarded as philosophers and included in standard surveys such as Parodi's *La philosophie contemporaine en France* and Isaac Benrubi's *Les Sources et les courants de la philosophie contemporaine en France*. Even today, the work of sociologists such as Pierre Bourdieu and Bruno Latour has a strong philosophical component.

metaphysical primacy of thought but does not require his mind–body dualism. The view is, in fact, consistent with any ontology that allows for these two central assertions: that the value of human existence derives from the higher mental faculties (both intellectual and affective) of individuals; and that these faculties are neither reducible to material processes (including sense experience) nor assimilable to a higher level of reality (the absolute). Spiritualism is thus an assertion of the metaphysical and ethical primacy of the individual mind (*l'esprit*), against the claims of materialism, empiricism, and certain sorts of idealism.

One of the earliest and most influential spiritualists was François Maine de Biran (1766–1824). Arguing against Locke, Hume, and, especially, Condillac and the *Idéologues*, he maintained that empiricist reductions of mental life to the flow of passing sense impressions were refuted by our experiences of willing (*effort voulu*), which reveal a persisting self continually straining against bodily resistance. In these experiences, a unified self or mind is revealed through what Maine de Biran calls our *sens intime* (inner awareness). Such inner experiences of human freedom remained the foundation of later spiritualist cases for the ultimate autonomy and value of the individual.

The spiritualist legacy reached early twentieth-century French philosophy primarily through Félix Ravaisson (1813–1900). Ravaisson never held a university chair (Cousin, who had initially helped advance his career, blocked the appointment). But he exercised major influence through a series of administrative positions: inspector of libraries, general inspector of higher education, and, most important, chair of the committee that set and graded the *agrégation* examination in philosophy. His interest in art led to scholarly work on Da Vinci and on ancient Greek sculpture and an appointment as curator at the Louvre, where he carried out a major restoration of the Venus de Milo.

In 1867, Ravaisson published his *La philosophie en France au XIXe siècle*, a report commissioned by the French government on the occasion of the Exposition of 1867. Surveying the history of French philosophy after 1800, he noted the dominant place of Comte's positivism and of its main rival, the eclecticism of Victor Cousin. Ravaisson argued that both these positions had failed and that exigencies of fact and argument were driving French philosophy toward the spiritualism that Maine de Biran had developed but his contemporaries ignored. Ravaisson predicted a new philosophical

epoch dominated by what he called “spiritualistic realism or positivism”; that is, a philosophy that gives priority to spiritual “facts” in the same way that ordinary realism and positivism do to perceptual and scientific facts. Such an epoch would, he said, have as its “generating principle the consciousness that mind [*l’esprit*] has of itself, a self recognized as an existence from which all other existences derive and on which they depend, and which is nothing other than its own activity”.¹⁶

His prediction was entirely correct. By 1890 Ravaisson’s books were, in Parodi’s words, “the breviaries of all the young philosophers”¹⁷ and the philosophical agenda was being set by thinkers such as Lachelier, Boutroux, and Bergson (all students of Ravaisson at the *École Normale*), who were strongly sympathetic to the spiritualist view.

If, as Comte had famously said, materialism is the claim that the higher can be explained by the lower, spiritualism claims to explain the lower by the higher. Here, of course, the higher is the mind, but not the Cartesian mind that includes any experience whatsoever. The spiritualist mind is the locus of only the higher mental functions such as intelligence, will, and aesthetic appreciation. It does not include lower forms of mentality (e.g., sense perception and emotions), associated with our “animal” nature. The mind or spirit is, then, the locus of the “properly human” dimension of our experience. The project of spiritualism is, first, to describe, accurately and in detail, our experience of ourselves as spiritual beings; and second, to show that everything else (the realm of nature) is subordinated to and dependent on spirit. True to Maine de Biran’s seminal descriptions, Ravaisson and his followers made freedom the fundamental feature of the mind, thereby placing creative action at the root of all reality. Whereas Maine de Biran understood freedom primarily in terms of the effort exerted by the will, Ravaisson emphasized the desire (and therefore the love of the good) behind this effort, a desire he saw as ultimately directed toward the perfect goodness of the Christian God.

Although Descartes can be readily regarded as the first French spiritualist, since he gave clear epistemic and metaphysical priority to intelligence and volition, Ravaisson replaced the Cartesian

¹⁶ *La philosophie en France au XIX^e siècle*, 275.

¹⁷ *La philosophie contemporaine en France*, 29.

dualism of mind and matter as separable substances with a distinction between mental life and nature as two interdependent poles of activity. (Here he was influenced by the later philosophy of Schelling, with whom he had studied in Munich,¹⁸ and by Aristotle's doctrine of form.¹⁹) This was the basis for his own introspective study of our experience of habit, a topic suggested by both Maine de Biran and Aristotle. Following Maine de Biran, he saw habit as a paradigm example of the union of the creative free agency of mind with the repetitive stability of the material world. In moving from knowledge based on explicit reflection to a habit of implicit understanding (as a cook might at first make crepes by meticulously following a recipe but later come to toss them off "by second nature"), we go from an external relation to the objects of our knowledge to "an immediate understanding in which object and subject are fused".²⁰ Here we are not far from the intuition of Bergson, who wrote an elegant and perceptive appreciation of Ravaissin when he succeeded him in the Académie des Sciences Morales et Politiques.²¹

Spiritualism was typically a conservative position, a comfortable intellectual niche for supporters of an elitist bourgeois politics and Catholic Christianity. But there was a more radical variant, that of Charles Renouvier (1815–1903), which, though always relatively marginal, eventually exerted significant influence. Renouvier was a student at the same time as Ravaissin at the École Normale. He was very active in politics at the time of the 1848 revolution but became disillusioned after Louis Napoléon's coup in 1851 destroyed hopes for a socialist democracy. He abandoned politics for philosophy, although he did later edit and publish a journal, *La critique philosophique*, aimed at a general intellectual audience. Renouvier never held an academic position (he had sufficient inherited wealth to

¹⁸ We should not make too much of the personal contact with Schelling. As Bergson tells us, Ravaissin spent only a few weeks in Munich. Also, Schelling spoke French badly and Ravaissin was not much better at German. See Henri Bergson, "Notice sur la vie et les oeuvres de M. Félix Ravaissin-Mollien", in *La pensée et le mouvant*, reprinted in *Oeuvres*, 1458.

¹⁹ Ravaissin first made his name with a two-volume commentary on Aristotle's *Metaphysics* (1837). He viewed Aristotle as the true founder of spiritualist philosophy because, even more than Plato, he overcame empiricism and materialism, by making forms the causes of the movements of real existents and locating formal perfection in the mental lives of individual intelligences. On this and other aspects of Ravaissin's thought, see Émile Boutroux's very helpful "La philosophie de Félix Ravaissin", in his *Nouvelles études d'histoire de la philosophie*, 194–220.

²⁰ Félix Ravaissin, *De l'habitude*, 37.

²¹ Henri Bergson, "Notice sur la vie et les oeuvres de M. Félix Ravaissin-Mollien", in *La pensée et le mouvant*, reprinted in *Oeuvres*.

make a profession unnecessary). After the coup, he left Paris for the south of France, where he had been born, and, working there in relative isolation, wrote continuously until his death in 1903, producing one of the largest oeuvres in the history of French philosophy.²²

Renouvier tied his philosophy, which he characterized as “neo-criticism” (or, sometimes, “French criticism”), to that of Kant, although he does not seem to have penetrated very deeply into Kant’s thought, which was more a starting-point than a continuing inspiration. What he took from Kant was mainly the idea of our phenomenal experience as structured by intellectual categories that are conditions of the possibility of this experience. He rejected Kant’s noumenal world, maintaining that the phenomenal realm is the sole reality. He also saw phenomenal reality as fundamentally relational, excluding substance from the list of categories (and including becoming) and making relation the basic category of which all others are forms. These empiricist tendencies were, however, balanced by the addition of categories with a stronger metaphysical content than Kant’s. Specifically, Renouvier introduced finality (purpose) and personality as essential structures of the phenomenal world. This led him to the characteristic spiritualist emphasis on the creative choices of individual minds as the driving force of reality.

Renouvier’s ethical and political thought reflects the centrality of individual freedom.²³ But freedom is also a crucial epistemological category for him, since he holds that experience, even as informed by the system of categories, does not entirely determine what we must accept as the truth. Our judgments, from the lowest perceptions to the highest metaphysical speculations, always involve an irreducible element of free choice. Spiritualists such as Ravaisson were uneasy with this epistemological indeterminism and even more so with Renouvier’s religious views.²⁴ His relativism left no place for a being of absolute perfection, such as the Christian God, and he also rejected the idea of an actual infinity – quantitative or qualitative – as incoherent. On the other hand, Renouvier thought that the

²² Renouvier’s most important work is his four-volume *Essais de critique générale*, Paris: 1854–64.

²³ William Logue, *Charles Renouvier: Philosopher of Liberty*, emphasizes Renouvier’s ethics and politics and provides some useful historical background.

²⁴ Ravaisson offers a guardedly sympathetic treatment of Renouvier in his *La philosophie en France au XIXe siècle*, 110–18. This was probably the beginning of an awareness of Renouvier’s work in the wider intellectual community.

impossibility of an actual infinity required a beginning of the universe in time and accepted personal immortality as necessary to make sense of moral obligations. This led him to assert the existence of God as creator and moral ideal, but he insisted that this being was finite in both knowledge and power (which finitude, he thought, provides the only plausible solution to the problem of evil). Moreover, God's creative role is consistent with human freedom since he is, as Renouvier put it, a "creator of creators".²⁵ Renouvier's heterodox theological views underlay his vigorous practical opposition to the power of the French Catholic Church, an opposition focused during the 1870s and 1880s in his journal, *La critique philosophique* (and its supplement, *La critique religieuse*), which followed a strongly anti-Catholic editorial policy.

Renouvier's lack of a position in the educational establishment, along with the unorthodoxy of his views, limited his influence on French philosophy. But the vigor of his thought – not to mention the huge amount he published over a period of sixty-one years – had an undeniable impact. He attracted a small group of disciples (and the strong admiration of William James) and eventually received some very belated official recognition, including election to the Académie des Sciences Morales et Politiques in 1900, at the age of eighty-five. His most important direct influence was on the work of Octave Hamelin, who offered a detailed analysis of Renouvier's work in his Sorbonne course of 1906–7 and whose own powerful philosophical system was strongly informed by Renouvier's work.²⁶

IDEALISM: LACHELIER AND BOUTROUX

Mainline spiritualist thought had a natural tendency to idealism (and, indeed, Ravaisson sometimes called the view he championed idealism). But spiritualism allows the denial of the key idealist claim that ultimately only minds exist and is committed to a genuine plurality of individual persons and, especially, to a distinction between finite human minds and the infinite God that created them. (Hence the attraction of spiritualism for Catholic thinkers, including Ravaisson, Lachelier, and Blondel.) We need, therefore, to distin-

²⁵ Address to the Edinburgh Philosophical Society (1914), cited by J. Alexander Gunn, *Modern French Philosophy*, 294.

²⁶ Octave Hamelin, *Le système de Renouvier*. Hamelin also wrote important studies of the "systems" of Aristotle and Descartes.

guish at least between spiritualism and the absolute idealism of a Fichte or a Hegel.

In any case, idealism in France derived from appropriations of Kant, not Hegel, who had little influence there before the 1920s.²⁷ There were no translations of Hegel until 1859 (twenty-eight years after his death), and it was not until well into the twentieth century that full French versions of major books such as *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, *The Science of Logic*, and *The Philosophy of Right* were available. Even Kant's influence was slow in developing and became important only with Jules Lachelier (1832–1918), who presented a Kantian account of scientific reasoning in his thesis, *Du fondement de l'induction*, defended in 1871 and published the next year.²⁸

Lachelier's thesis is an elegantly written *tour de force*, which, in the space of about 100 pages, expands an analysis of the problem of induction into a comprehensive idealist view of reality. The problem of induction is that of finding and justifying principles that warrant the move “from knowledge of facts to knowledge of the laws which order them” (*Du fondement de l'induction* [FI], 3/1). He endorses the common views that the conclusions of an inductive inference assert more than its premises and so cannot be grounded in the principles of deductive logic, and that inductive inferences require a principle of efficient causality, guaranteeing that the same phenomena will follow whenever the same antecedent conditions occur. But he argues that induction also requires a principle of final causality.

Efficient causality tells us only that *if* conditions are the same, the same results will follow. Successful induction also requires that we know that the conditions are the same. We can, of course, know from observation that conditions now *seem* to be the same as they were previously. But this gives no assurance that there are not *unobserved* conditions that make the situation different than it was previously. Lachelier gives the example of the biological law that members of a given species generally produce members of that same species. If all we knew was that the same phenomena follow if the

²⁷ Octave Hamelin (1856–1907), mentioned above, combined the spiritualism of Renouvier with something like Hegelian dialectic in his well-regarded *Essai sur les éléments principaux de la représentation* (1907). But Hamelin died early and his Hegelian tendencies had no extended influence.

²⁸ The index to Ravaisson's *La philosophie en France au XIXe siècle* shows the continuing dominance of pre-Kantian influences. It lists 6 references to Hegel, 7 to Kant, but 43 to Leibniz.

same conditions occur, “we would have to limit ourselves to asserting that the product of each generation would resemble its progenitors *if* all the required conditions come together”. To go further and maintain that the new generation will actually be of the same species as the previous, we must also know that “all these conditions do in fact come together” (*FI*, 11/5). Since we cannot generally know this by direct observation, we must assume that there is a principle of order at work that guarantees the stability of species by maintaining the same conditions of generation. By such a principle, a feature of a whole (the stability of a species) determines the developments of its parts (the generation of individual organisms). Such determination is, according to Kant’s definition, an instance of final causality. Although this example is biological, the point also holds for chemical and physical systems. Without a principle of final causality, we would know only a world of (efficient) causal relations among objects defined entirely by those relations. We would have no access to the familiar world of substantial objects that are the enduring instantiations of natural kinds.

There are, then, two principles required for successful inductive inference: one of efficient causality, “in virtue of which phenomena form a series wherein the existence of the preceding determines the existence of the following,” and one of final causality, “in virtue of which these series, in their turn, form systems, in which the idea of the whole determines the existence of the parts” (*FI*, 12/6). But is there any way to justify these principles?

Lachelier thinks we can do so by showing that the principles are essential to the “concrete and particular acts by which thought constitutes itself while seizing immediately upon reality” (*FI*, 14/7). But neither empiricism nor rationalism can make the case. If, with empiricists, we hold that knowledge is merely of phenomenal appearances, then – as the failure of Mill’s justification of induction shows – any argument for induction will have to be from phenomenal experience and therefore valid only if circular. If, on the contrary, as rationalists maintain, knowledge is of sensorily inaccessible things-in-themselves, then induction could in principle be justified on the basis of truths about the structure and stability of the substances or causes beneath appearances. But we have no access to such substances and causes, and evocation of them is merely “the assertion of a problem transformed into its solution” (*FI*, 36/20). (Lachelier also maintains that, even if there were, say, an intellectual

intuition of things-in-themselves, this would still give them only as they appear to us intellectually at a given moment, not as they are apart from our experience of them.)

There is, however, another alternative, based on the Kantian claim “that whatever may be the mysterious foundation beneath phenomena, the order in which they follow each other is exclusively determined by the requirements of our own thought”. To see if Kant might be right, Lachelier says that we should try to establish the two principles of induction “by showing that if they did not exist then human thought would not be possible” (*FI*, 42/23). A successful demonstration will confirm Kant’s view of the active role of the mind in knowledge and justify induction.

Thought is about the phenomena (sensations) of our world. But a thought is not itself another phenomenon nor is it about just one phenomenon. It requires a subject, distinct from the succession of phenomena, that exists as a unity over against this succession. Traditional (pre-critical) views locate this distinctness and unity in the thinking subject’s existence as a metaphysical substance separated from the world it experiences. But, given this separation, there is no way to understand how thought could ever know the world outside of it. It would have to remain enclosed in its own autonomous existence. For knowledge to be possible, thought must rather be a unity in virtue of its relation to the world of phenomena; that is, thought must be one precisely because it unites the succession of phenomena into a single world that is the object of its experience and knowledge. The unity of thought is not that of an autonomous metaphysical act but that of a form providing coherence and hence intelligibility to the flux of sensations.

Reflection on our experience immediately reveals that one aspect of this coherence and intelligibility is the single time and space in which phenomena occur. But, Lachelier argues, space and time alone are not sufficient to unify phenomena into a coherent world. Phenomena existing in the same space and time could still occur in total independence of one another and never provide a coherent object for thought. Phenomena must also be unified through their interconnection by laws of necessary causal succession. Such laws of efficient causality provide the unity needed for phenomena to be coherent objects of thought. “Thus, all phenomena are subject to the law of efficient causes, because this law is the only foundation to which we can attribute the unity of the universe, and in its turn this

unity is the supreme condition of the possibility of thought” (*FI*, 47/26).

Lachelier further maintains that the phenomenal world, precisely because it is governed by efficient causality, must be a mechanistic world; that is, a world consisting entirely of motions determined by their antecedent motions. Phenomena occur in space and time; consequently their unity must be a unity that exists through space and time. But the only possible form of unity through space and time is continuous movement, understood as continuous change of spatial location over time. All phenomena must be movements. What we have, then, is a system of movements governed at every point and moment by strict laws of efficient causality: a mechanistic universe. Our Kantian turn seems to have led to what Lachelier calls an “idealistic materialism” (*FI*, 69/38). But we have not yet taken account of the role of final causality.

It might seem that we cannot effect a Kantian derivation of final causality since the distinctness and unity of the subject (and hence the possibility of thought) are guaranteed by efficient causality alone. But Lachelier maintains that the unity so guaranteed is “incomplete and superficial” (*FI*, 76/42). This is because an object given simply as part of a mechanical system of efficient causes is not given as a full-blooded thing in its own right (an instance of a structured kind) but only as, so to speak, a place-holder in the causal network. It has no intrinsic content but exists only through its causal relations to other items in the network. This corresponds to the point made above, in our analysis of inductive inference, that efficient causality by itself guarantees only that the same results follow from the same conditions, not that the same conditions will regularly recur; regular recurrence is necessary for the stability of enduring kinds. This sort of stability (or, equivalently, a world of things with enduring natures) is, as we have seen, guaranteed only by a principle of final causality. Lachelier acknowledges that thought could exist in the diminished world of mere efficient causality. But he maintains that this would be a “purely abstract existence”, because it would be in a world with no substantial content. Such an existence “would be, so far as thought is concerned, a state of illusion and death” (*FI*, 79/44). He therefore concludes that the fully real (concrete) existence of consciousness requires a principle of final causality.

The reality of final causality radically transforms Lachelier’s picture of the world. The truth of cosmic reality is not “idealistic

materialism”, which in fact expresses merely the abstract mechanical skeleton of a robust purposive nature. Movement still conforms to the patterns of mechanical laws, but it is now seen to be ultimately derived from forces that express the world’s intrinsic teleology. These forces are not intervening outside causes; they flow directly from the internal organization of natural objects. Indeed, Lachelier insists that force is not a thing in itself but “only the tendency of movement toward an end” (*FI*, 93/51). Most important, the priority of (teleological) force over movement implies the priority of freedom over determinism. An end cannot externally determine the means (movements) that bring it about because the end does not exist until the means have produced it. Rather, “the means dispose themselves in the order fitted to realize the end” (*FI*, 87/48). Consequently, finality requires that the forces informing natural movements be spontaneous tendencies to the relevant ends. On the abstract level of efficient causes, the purely quantitative formal structures of natural developments are still mechanically determined. But the qualitative content of concrete things is the contingent product of spontaneous activity.²⁹

Mere spontaneity is not full freedom. Every part of nature enjoys a certain freedom (and hence life and even thought) in that its goals are achieved by its innate tendency toward them, not by mechanistic determination. But freedom in its full sense consists “in the power of varying one’s purposes and in conceiving new ideas” (*FI*, 97/53–4). Animals act with a freedom limited to the precise means of fulfilling goals set for them by nature, as when a bird chooses materials and locations for its nest. Rational beings such as humans, however, employ intelligence not just to achieve pre-given goals but also “to conceive an infinite number of pure ideas which our will then undertakes to realize externally” (*FI*, 98/54). Freedom properly understood is not, as so many philosophers have thought, the will’s unconstrained choice of means of action; it is rather the intellect’s invention of new goals of action. Lachelier argues that freedom in this sense is required by the principle of final causality “since the systematic unity of nature could not be realized except as the result of original invention and creations properly so-called” (*FI*, 97/54).

We see, then, the transformation effected by the need to include

²⁹ In his *Études sur le syllogisme*, Lachelier argues that the syllogism provides the appropriate logic for the qualitative while mathematical logic (including the logic of relations) is appropriate for the quantitative.

the principle of final causality in our account of knowledge and the world: “the realm of final causes, by penetrating the realm of efficient causes without destroying it, exchanges everywhere force for inertia, life for death, freedom for fatality” (*FI*, 101/56, translation modified). The result is no longer the “idealistic materialism” of the world as a nexus of efficient causes but what Lachelier calls a “spiritualistic realism”, in which mechanism is subordinated to finality and “every being is a force, and every force is a thought which tends toward a more and more complete consciousness of itself” (*FI*, 102/56, translation modified). Lachelier’s final insistence on “realism” rather than “idealism” reflects not an assertion of a reality independent of thought – he remains an idealist in rejecting this – but rather an insistence on the metaphysical autonomy of individual persons, which he refuses to assimilate to any absolute thought. This keeps open a path to Lachelier’s Catholic commitment to an afterlife of personal salvation and immortality. But this is not a path that he thinks can be traveled by philosophical reflection since on it we “cross, by an act of moral faith, beyond the boundaries both of thought and of nature” (*FI*, 102/56).

Lachelier published very little beyond his thesis on induction,³⁰ but his influence was immense, particularly through his teaching at the École Normale, where he was *maître de conférences* (a post roughly equivalent to a Reader at a British university or an American associate professor) from 1864 to 1875, and, like Ravaisson, through his later position as chair of the committee that set the *agrégation* in philosophy. His writing and teaching set high standards of conceptual subtlety and rigor and also made serious engagement with Kant *de rigueur* among his pupils, including, most prominently, Boutroux and Bergson.³¹

Émile Boutroux (1845–1921) dominated the academic philosophy of the Third Republic through World War I. He followed his teacher, Lachelier, as *maître de conférences* at the École Normale (1877–86), where he taught Bergson, Blondel, and Durkheim. He

³⁰ We should, however, mention his famous article, “Psychologie et métaphysique” (translated as “Psychology and Metaphysics” in *The Philosophy of Jules Lachelier*), first published in 1885, in which Lachelier develops his idealism via a description of psychological experience (developed in opposition to positivist reductionism) and with a particular emphasis on the role of the will.

³¹ Bergson was not formally a student of Lachelier, since he did not enter the École Normale until 1878, three years after Lachelier stopped teaching there. But Lachelier was a strong influence on Bergson, who dedicated his doctoral thesis to him.

formulated his major philosophical ideas in his thesis, *La contingence de les lois de la nature* (1874). His later work consisted of reformulations of these views (particularly in *De l'idée de loi naturelle dans la science et la philosophie contemporaine* [1895]) and numerous important studies in the history of philosophy (from 1888 to 1902 he was professor of the history of modern philosophy at the Sorbonne). Boutroux was also a leading figure in "official" French academic life, a role that, perhaps, led to his writing, in 1915, *Philosophy and War*, one of those unfortunate books connecting German aggression with German philosophy.³²

Boutroux shared the general concern with the tension between science and freedom. He endorsed Lachelier's picture of a world in which free and purposive creativity had priority over the abstractions of scientific causality but was dissatisfied with Lachelier's Kantian willingness to accept a total scientific determinism for the phenomenal world. Because our lives are led in this world, Boutroux argues, this concession to determinism means that any given human action is the necessary product of past actions. Perhaps I have a noumenal nature (or character) that has been created by a choice outside the deterministic network. But then my freedom has been entirely spent in the creation of this character, which becomes the determining cause of all my individual actions. "A strange doctrine", he concludes, "one that regards . . . repentance, conquests of self, struggles between good and evil, as but the necessary events of a drama the issue of which has been decided upon beforehand". Moreover, Boutroux adds, even this character cannot be properly regarded as my free creation. As a part of the intelligible (phenomenal) world, it too must belong to a deterministic system. The Kantian effort at reconciliation of freedom and determinism succeeds only in placing freedom and hence "morality in a sphere inaccessible to human consciousness". As a result, "this hypothesis would prevent us from passing any moral judgment either on others or on ourselves".³³

Boutroux concludes that the assertion of human freedom must be at the expense of a deterministic view of phenomena; to justify the claim that we are free, we must establish that the phenomenal world described by science is indeterministic. To say that the world is

³² For an American example of this genre, see George Santayana, *Egotism and German Philosophy*.

³³ *La contingence de les lois de la nature*, 169, 170.

indeterministic is to say that the laws governing it are not necessary. Here Boutroux has in mind three senses of necessity: the analytic necessity of logical truth, the synthetic a priori necessity of Kantian truths about the conditions of possible experience, and the empirical necessity of de facto constant correlations.

He undertakes to show that, in all of these senses and at every level, there is no necessity in the world. His approach is nothing if not comprehensive and systematic.³⁴ It begins by distinguishing a series of six successively more specific levels of description. The first level (that of “being”, in Boutroux’s terminology) is simply that of an aggregate of separate individuals. Subsequent levels correspond to further specifications of these individuals. The second level (that of “genera”) adds that the individuals have natures allowing them to be divided into qualitatively similar classes; the third (that of “matter”) makes the individuals material beings, extended in space and time; the fourth (that of “bodies”) adds that they are structured material substances, for example, atoms or compounds of atoms; the fifth (that of “life”) that they are organisms; the sixth (that of “man”) that they are intelligent. For each level, Boutroux argues that there is neither external nor internal necessity; that is, the level is not required to exist in virtue of a preceding level (external necessity), nor, given its existence, are there necessary laws governing its development (internal necessity). In so arguing, he must, of course, show that there is no external or internal necessity of any of the three types (analytic, synthetic a priori, and empirical). He must, then, provide six arguments against necessity for each level, for a grand total of thirty-six arguments. There are, however, just a few basic patterns to Boutroux’s arguments.

These patterns are well illustrated in his treatment of being, the first level of reality. Here we begin with nothing more than a collection of individual beings and do not assume that they are intelligent, alive, substantial, material, or even grouped into distinct genera. Boutroux’s first question is about external necessity: is there anything outside the realm of actual being (in the realm of mere possibility) that requires the existence of a collection of beings? Certainly, there is no analytic necessity, no contradiction in asserting that a given collection of beings does not exist. An existent is a

³⁴ Mathieu Schyns offers an excellent account of Boutroux’s sometimes difficult argumentation in *La philosophie d’Émile Boutroux*.

synthesis of possibility and actuality (the actualization of a possibility), and there is no logical necessity for any such synthesis. Nor can it be maintained that the very possibility of experience requires the actuation of a specific set of possible beings. In the domain of experience, the possible is simply that which may or may not be given as an object of experience. Our experiential knowledge (science) tells us about connections that exist among the actualized possibilities, but the mere fact of experience does not require that certain possible beings be actualized. Nor, finally, is it possible to argue that we know as a matter of empirical fact that any of the objects of our experience *had* to be actualized.

So the existence of beings is a contingent fact, not an externally imposed necessity. But, given this existence, are there necessary laws for the development of a collection of beings (i.e., internal necessity)? Boutroux first argues that there can be no question of a logical necessity because developmental laws require us to think of the beings they govern as in certain respects stable and unchanging, whereas the mere idea of a collection of beings is consistent with their being in random flux. As to the possibility of a Kantian a priori causal connection, Boutroux agrees that the idea of a productive cause would have to be a priori, since it goes beyond anything given in our experience. But he notes that, precisely for this reason, we have no basis for postulating a metaphysical connection that is not grounded in experience. It might be maintained that there is still the empirical necessity of a scientific law, which is revealed by experience and does determine that one phenomenon follow upon another. But Boutroux argues, first, that even an exact correspondence between cause and effect would not prove a necessary connection. Even if, for example, observation of gases showed that the product of pressure and volume was always exactly equal to a constant multiplied by temperature, this might merely show that gases have always behaved this way; deviations might still be possible. But more important, he argues, is the fact that our observations are never able to show the exact validity of a law. We measure pressure, volume, and temperature only up to a certain range of uncertainty, and connections between these phenomena may be indeterminate precisely within this range.

Boutroux deploys similar arguments for the higher levels of reality. He excludes logical necessities of existence or developmental laws by showing that each successive level involves new features and laws

that are not implied by the preceding levels. For example, a world of non-material genera and species is discontinuous, whereas a world of matter is extended and hence continuous; and matter may vary in size and position without changing qualitatively, so that the qualitative laws of non-material genera cannot determine purely quantitative relations among material entities. Kantian a priori claims of existence or causal connection he rejects by showing that our actual experience of phenomena does not support such claims. For example, although metaphysicians may understand the solubility of sugar in water in terms of unobservable powers informing these two substances, scientific observation reveals only that there is a constant correlation between sugar's melting and its being put into water. Finally, Boutroux rejects claims of empirical necessity by arguing, first, that experience never excludes the possibility that a given level of object might not exist. For example, even if we knew that living cells were the products of certain chemical reactions, we would not know that such reactions had to occur or that cells did not merely happen to follow from them. And Boutroux always excludes the empirical necessity of laws by appealing to the inexactness in our knowledge of the correlations they express. For the case of organisms, he suggests that the laws governing them (e.g., the law of adaptation, which says that species vary to survive in new circumstances) are so imprecise that biology does not in fact constitute a positive science.

Boutroux's defense of indeterminism has a distinctly positivist, anti-Kantian, anti-idealist bent. He takes for granted the authority of scientific descriptions, rejects logical analysis of concepts as irrelevant to questions of truth about the world, and insists on an empiricist reading of immediate experience that replaces Kantian necessities with Humean correlations. This positivist bent is even more obvious in *De l'idée de loi naturelle dans la science et la philosophie contemporaine*, where Boutroux makes his case by a direct analysis of scientific results rather than by abstract philosophical argumentation.³⁵ But his account is also relentlessly anti-reductive, with each successive level of reality distinguished by new traits (the continuity of matter, the self-determination of life, the moral freedom of human beings) that cannot be explained via "lower" categories. Moreover,

³⁵ Here, as we shall see, Boutroux's views have important similarities to those of his brother-in-law – with whom he also had close intellectual contacts – Henri Poincaré.

the distinctive features of each ontological level are always further and richer achievements of freedom. Boutroux deploys positivist epistemology in the service of spiritualist ontology. Ravaisson and Lachelier might well question his means, but they would agree with his result.